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In a fully graded plan all children in a given grade are expected to do the same work in a year's time, while in a nongraded program each child works at the level in each subject for which he is ready. Most schools today lie somewhere along the graded-nongraded continuum. Three ways of implementing a nongraded program are (1) provide multilevel instruction in a self-contained, heterogeneous classroom; (2) assign children to self-contained classes according to performance levels; and (3) regroup a large aggregation of children from time to tome to form classes that work at different levels under different teachers. Administrative leadership is essential in implementing a nongraded approach. One of the principal weaknesses of the graded plan is that it does not provide for individual growth and learning differences. Other factors contributing to the present interest in nongrading are the influence of progressive education, the mental health movement in education, and the published materials of Professors J. I. Goodlad and R. H. Anderson. Research efforts have not yet yielded meaningful results on the relative effectiveness of graded and nongraded programs, but the nongraded program seems to be the trend of the future. (HW)

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Nongrading in the Elementary School

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NONGRADING in the Elementary School

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PREFACE

The principal focus of this book is to explain in a simplified manner what nongrading is and how it might work in the elementary school. The presentation deals with certain practical questions that teachers and administrators have about the operation of a nongraded program. Specific examples of different aspects of nongraded programs are included because many teachers and administrators want help in translating ideas from the realm of theory to the level of daily practice. It is one thing to consider the general theory of nongrading and to conclude that the approach seems desirable. It is something else again to understand what nongrading might involve in terms of the specifics of daily school operation. Hopefully, a consideration of these specifics will help teachers and administrators understand more clearly some of the procedures and attendant problems that are likely to be involved in operating a nongraded program.

Among the examples developed for this book are diagrams which illustrate how children might progress from teacher to teacher during their years in a nongraded elementary school. An important feature of the book is that these principal ways of assignment are discussed together so that the reader has the opportunity to compare them. Another feature is the example of a report form for a nongraded school.

The examples of various aspects of nongrading which appear in the following chapters were developed to fit with the usual curriculum found in most elementary schools today — a curriculum that is more subject-centered and pre-planned than it is child-centered, integrated, and emergent. There are a number of good reasons, of course, why the latter type of program might be more desirable; but I feel that in the typical public school, the pre-planned, subject-centered program is likely to continue as the dominant pattern for some time to come. With this in mind, the examples presented here have been designed to fit with such a program.

Nongrading is a way of working with children which a school staff would probably adopt gradually, rather than implement in one dramatic reorganization. In the process of gradual change, definite modifications would need to be effected in the way the curriculum was organized and in the way instruction was conducted. Hopefully, the staff might also consider revisions in the actual *content* of the curriculum. However, the suggestions for a nongraded program presented in this book are not dependent upon extensive modifications in the content of the curriculum.

To my wife, Joyce

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1

The Meaning of Nongrading

Introduction

In recent years the nongraded elementary school has created considerable interest among persons in education. Teachers and administrators in many school systems indicate a desire to know more about this approach to teaching. They are curious about it, and one of the first questions that is often asked is simply, "What is it? — what is nongrading?" Since this question is so basic, it seems appropriate to begin by considering the meaning of this term.

A helpful way to build an understanding of this new approach is to compare it with a graded school program. In making a comparison, graded and nongraded programs will be viewed as though they were at opposite ends of a continuum. When the essential features of each are examined, it is clear that in theory the plans are opposites. In their actual operation in specific schools, however, we do not find the differences nearly so clear-cut. Usually a compromise has been made between the two plans, and the result is a program that lies somewhere along the continuum rather than at one end or the other. There are few, if any, schools that adhere to a graded program in its fullest extent, and it would be difficult indeed to conduct a program that was one hundred per cent nongraded. Nevertheless, in attempting to build an

understanding of nongrading, it is helpful to compare it with the graded plan, and to consider the two as opposites.

The Graded School

What are the essential features of a graded school? As indicated in the previous paragraph, the description which follows portrays a program that is one hundred per cent graded. In such a program the total work of the elementary school is divided into six levels, more commonly referred to as grades. The work to be accomplished in each grade is clearly designated. It usually consists of specific skills, topics, and textbooks to be covered. All of the boys and girls in a given grade are expected to do only the work reserved for that grade and complete it in a year's time. If they do not complete it, they are retained for a year to repeat all of the work.

Pupils are not helped to progress beyond the designated work for the grade because they are not expected to do this until the following year when they are in the next higher grade. If pupils were permitted to go beyond the designated work, this would interfere with the program conducted by the teacher in the next higher grade.

Similarly, a pupil would not be given work equivalent to that of a lower grade because each child in the grade is expected to do that which is specified for the grade. If he cannot, he does not belong there and should have been retained in a lower grade where the program is at his level.

Many of us who have been teachers realize, of course, the folly of expecting that all children in a given grade should do only the work of that grade. Some of the children are capable of a more challenging program; others would find their school efforts more successful if they could progress more slowly and deal with less complicated materials. The theory of the graded school, however, ignores these realities.

As indicated earlier, there are few, if any, elementary schools in which the graded plan is implemented to its fullest extent. In most so-called graded schools of today, the plan has been modified somewhat; thus it is not at the extreme end of the continuum but more toward the nongraded side. The extent of the movement toward the opposite side depends on the modifications that have been made. Good teachers have always tried to make some adaptations

in their instructional program for children of different ability, but if the graded approach really prevails in the school system where the teacher is employed, he is limited in the adaptations he can make. He is expected to give failing marks to the children who cannot do grade-level work, despite the progress they may have made at their own level.

The Nongraded School

In a nongraded school, the program is not divided into six grades and presented so that children at any given grade are limited to just the work designated for their grade. There is no such thing as *second-grade work* or *fourth-grade work* which constitutes a uniform program of instruction that all children in a given classroom must accomplish in a year's time. Instead, an attempt is made to help each child work at the level where he is in each subject, and progress in the best way he can. This is the essence of the nongraded program.

If one pupil in a class is ready to study more advanced skills, he is helped to do so even if this work in a graded school had previously been reserved for the next higher grade. If another pupil in the same classroom needs to devote his efforts to less complicated tasks in reading or arithmetic, he is helped to do so even if this means working on skills which were in the domain of a lower grade in a graded school.

In a nongraded classroom, some children will be studying more advanced materials while others devote their energies to different materials. It is also probable that a given pupil will progress more rapidly in one skill subject than in another. The range of performance in such subjects as reading and arithmetic is likely to extend over many grade levels, unless the children have been assigned to teachers on the basis of performance levels, in which case the range would be somewhat less. The teacher does not expect that all the children will become proficient in the same skills by the end of the year or that all will have completed the same textbooks.

The foregoing explanation of a nongraded program pertains especially to the skill subjects. Work in the content subjects might be handled the same way. However, if it was conducted so that all of the children in a classroom studied the same social studies or science topic at the same time, it would still be possible to practice

a nongraded approach. The teacher would simply expect that some children would be able to study the topic in greater depth than others, and would provide for these differences.

In a nongraded program, expectations differ for different children. It is accepted that some will do more than others; the teacher attempts to help each child work at the level where he is and then, through instruction that is adjusted so that he will have reasonable success, to progress as best he can. When a child is eventually assigned to another classroom, he would be helped to do work for which he is ready. The teacher in that class would not expect all children to be up to a certain level when they enter his room. He knows that some pupils will have progressed well into the skills that in a graded school would have been reserved for his grade.

In a nongraded school, boys and girls who are progressing especially slowly may need to spend more than the usual amount of time in the program. Those who take an extra year or two are not "failed," no do they "repeat" work in the skill subjects. They simply continue to study these subjects each year from the points where they left off the previous year. The extra year or two provides additional time to acquire important learnings. It should not be anticipated, however, that the extra time will enable all of these students to catch up with their age mates. Some may, but others may not. The nongraded program will not eliminate the fact that some students perform on a lower level in certain areas of work, but it will give these pupils more of an opportunity to have successful learning experiences at their own level. Illustrations of how a child might move through a nongraded program, including ways he might take an extra year, are provided in Chapter Five.

In actual practice there are few, if any, schools that are completely nongraded. Teachers have generally found it too difficult to vary instruction in each subject for each of twenty-five to thirty-five children in a class. Because of this, compromises are usually made, and the result is a cross between graded and nongraded plans. The work may be more nongraded in some subjects than others, and for some students than others. Certain pupils may be able to work independently at their own levels part of the time, but some may not be able to work as well this way because they lack sufficient maturity. The teacher may keep these children together for sub-group instruction. Although sub-group instruction may not result in work that is adjusted exactly to each child's level of achievement, the work will probably be more appropriate than if everyone in the class was given the same instruction.

Although it is difficult to develop a program that is completely nongraded, this does not have to be interpreted to mean that all efforts to un-grade should be abandoned. Many educators would argue that a little nongrading is more desirable than none at all.

In the comparison of graded and nongraded programs that is being made here, it is important to recall that it is the theoretical differences between the two plans that are being described. These differences are clear-cut. In actual practice, however, there are few schools in which one plan or the other is employed exclusively; we would be apt to find a mixture of the two. The typical graded school of today is not fully graded; it embodies some nongraded practices. Likewise, schools which are said to be nongraded, are unlikely to be completely this way; they contain certain vestiges of graded operation.

In the typical graded school of today, one of the best examples of the partial incorporation of nongraded thinking is the practice of sub-group instruction in reading. This is a fairly common practice in many so-called graded schools, yet it is clearly a move away from the graded side of the continuum toward the nongraded side. By organizing two or three reading groups in his class, the teacher is attempting to adjust instruction in order to work with the children more nearly at the levels where they are. Of course, if the teacher does not allow the top group to progress into reading material that is above grade level, his acceptance of the nongraded approach would be minimal; and the same would be true if he insisted on taking the slower groups through the books for his grade whether or not the pupils were ready.

Assigning Children to Teachers in Nongraded Schools

In a program that is nongraded, an attempt is made to help each child work at the level where he is in each subject and progress in the best way he can. There are three principal ways in which a program of this type can be implemented:

(1) By providing multi-level instruction in self-contained, heterogeneous classes. Because of the heterogeneous grouping, there would be a wide range in performance levels among children in any given classroom.

(2) By assigning children to self-contained classes according to performance levels and then providing instruction from one class to the next on different levels of difficulty. This plan is sometimes

referred to as homogeneous grouping, inter-classroom achievement grouping, ability grouping, or a multi-track plan.

(3) By regrouping a large aggregation of children from time to time during the day or week to form clusters, or classes, that work on different levels under the direction of different teachers. This plan could be conducted as either a departmentalized program or one involving team teaching. The third plan differs from the other two in that the children are assigned to work with different teachers instead of doing all of their work with one teacher in a self-contained classroom.

Plans 2 and 3 may or may not result in a thoroughly nongraded program; it would depend on whether an individual teacher worked with the children assigned to him in a whole-class manner or whether he provided multi-level instruction. As used here, the term *whole-class manner* means that all of the children are expected to do the same work in approximately the same time. The term *multi-level instruction* means that the teacher provides instruction and teaching materials on several levels of difficulty for the children assigned to him and permits the students to progress at different rates.

Even though an attempt is made in Plans 2 and 3 to form more homogeneous instructional groups, the children assigned to a given teacher would still display a considerable range in performance levels. For the program to be thoroughly nongraded, the teacher would need to provide multi-level instruction. If a teacher in Plans 2 or 3 instructs the children assigned to him in the whole-class lockstep manner, then the overall educational program in the school is only partially nongraded; but it is at least partially nongraded, because some attempt is being made in the total school program to adjust the work for pupils of different levels of achievement. The children in the lower performing classes or clusters are not expected to do the same things those in the higher performing groups are doing.

Hereafter in this book, when the term *partially nongraded* is used it refers to programs similar to Plans 2 or 3 in which the teacher instructs the children assigned to him in a whole-class, lockstep manner; whereas the term *thoroughly nongraded* is used to refer to programs in which the teacher provides multi-level instruction for the children assigned to him. The latter could occur in either Plans 1, 2, or 3.

In any one of the three major plans for implementing a nongraded program, it would be possible to have *single-age* or *mixed-*

age classrooms or instructional groups. In Plan 1, for instance, children of the same chronological age could be assigned to a classroom. On the other hand, children of two, or possibly three, age groups could be placed there, in which case there would be a mixed-age class. The one-room school which was so common years ago, is one illustration of a mixed-age class. The combination or split class used today in some graded schools is another example. In the latter example, the older children usually study the curriculum for the higher grade and the younger pupils study the curriculum for the lower grade. Each age group is restricted to the work of its own grade. However, in mixed-age classrooms where the work is nongraded, the boys and girls are helped to do the work for which they are ready, regardless of age.

Plan 2 could also be conducted with either single-age or mixed age classes. As an example of the former, the more able readers of a given chronological age could be assigned to one classroom, while the other children of that age but of a lower reading achievement would be placed in a different room.* Having been assigned this way, the pupils would remain in these rooms for their work in all of the subjects. Sometimes reading performance is not used as the sole criterion by which to form the classes, and instead a combination of various measures of performance is used.

Another way to assign children to classrooms in Plan 2 — one that would result in mixed-age classes — would be to put into the same room pupils of several ages who are at about the same point in reading achievement. In this arrangement, a typical self-contained class might include a few bright seven-year-olds, a number of eight-year-olds, and a few slow nine-year-olds, all of whom performed at about a third grade level in reading. If this procedure for assigning children to classrooms was used, there would probably be a very wide range of performance in other subjects, such as arithmetic. The teacher would hardly be able to teach arithmetic by the whole-class method. Although the children in the class might be fairly homogeneous in their general level of reading at the time of their assignment, they would probably separate quickly because they differ widely in mental ability. Many of the bright seven-year-olds would progress faster in reading than the slow nine-year-olds.

Plan 3 could also be conducted with either single-age or mixed-age groups. A departmentalized or team teaching arrangement could be organized for a large aggregation of children who were the same

*A program of this type is sometimes called a multi-track plan.

age. It would also be possible to include two or three age groups in this aggregation. In the latter case, there would be a good bit of overlap in the performance levels of the children of different ages. Those who were fairly homogeneous could be placed in clusters or classes in a given subject, and could be re-grouped for work in different subjects.

Each of the three plans for implementing a nongraded program has its problems. In Plan 1 where heterogeneous grouping is practiced, the teacher is faced with the formidable task of providing multi-level instruction commensurate with the wide range in the children's performance levels. Because of the difficulties of providing for the wide range of achievement levels in heterogeneous classrooms, some teachers believe that Plan 2, where an attempt is made to group children according to performance levels, would make teaching easier. Supposedly, the children in a classroom would be more alike and thus easier to teach, but grouping this way does not eliminate pupil differences. Children grouped by one criterion, such as reading, will still differ greatly in other areas of the curriculum. Even in reading, the differences are not reduced sufficiently to warrant teaching all the children the same thing at the same time. Adjustments for individual differences would still be desirable, and would have to be made if the program was to be more than just partially nongraded.

Plan 3 poses problems too. If a team arrangement is developed, the two, three, or four teachers in the team will find that it is not an easy task to work together to provide nongraded instruction for a large aggregation of 55, 82, or 110 children. If a departmentalized program is organized, this may lead to a more rigid compartmentalization of learning experiences. Some educators favor the self-contained classroom because they feel it makes it easier to conduct integrative learning experiences.

In a few of the schools that have tried to develop nongraded programs, a given teacher remains with his class, or with the children assigned to him for departmentalized work, for two and sometimes three years. This practice is often referred to as *teacher-cycling*. It is not an integral part of the nongraded approach, although some persons seem to have the notion that it is. It may be coupled with a nongraded program, but it certainly does not have to be. In most nongraded schools employing Plans 1 or 2, the children have a new teacher each year, and he does his best at the outset to determine each child's performance levels. He

then attempts to conduct an instructional program which takes into account these differences in performance.

Chapter Five deals more extensively with the different ways children have been assigned to teachers in nongraded schools.

Grading and Nongrading: A Further Discussion of the Meaning of These Two Terms

In the opinion of some educators, the meanings for the terms *grading* and *nongrading* do not involve differences in methods of teaching or ways of organizing children for instruction; the terms pertain solely to differences in the way a curriculum is organized. These educators believe that grading should mean only that certain curriculum items are to be taught to students during a certain period of time, and that nongrading should mean only that these limitations do not exist. They contend that these differences are purely structural, and that differences in the way teachers work with children or differences in the way pupils are organized for instruction are not involved at all.

In a strict sense, perhaps these terms should have only these limited meanings. However, as grading is practiced, it has tended to foster certain types of teaching procedures. For a nongraded program to be put into operation, it is necessary that different teaching procedures be used or that children be organized differently for instruction. Thus to think of grading and nongrading solely in terms of curriculum organization, and entirely apart from these other procedures, creates an artificial separation. If nongrading is to mean anything in practice, certain grouping and/or instructional methods will have to be used. In this book nongrading is viewed in a broader context which includes consideration of the ways in which teachers would need to work with children and the ways in which pupils are assigned to teachers for instruction.

The practice of limiting the meaning of grading and nongrading solely to differences in the way the curriculum is organized has been one of the reasons why some of the research studies comparing the relative effectiveness of graded and nongraded programs have yielded meaningless results. In these studies, little attention was paid to the instructional or grouping procedures that were employed. If teachers were free to have children study at any level in the curriculum, it was accepted that a nongraded program

existed, whether or not provision was actually made to help pupils work at these different levels. Similarly, in the graded schools which were used for comparison purposes, little attention was given to whether the children were instructed in lockstep fashion or whether the work was individualized within the confines of the graded content. It is not really feasible to determine whether a program is graded or nongraded unless consideration is given to the teaching and grouping procedures which are employed, because it is these procedures which transform nongrading from a mere expression of intent to something that is real and operative.

Establishing a Nongraded Program: The Need for Administrative Leadership

In studying individual schools that have developed nongraded programs, this author has become increasingly aware of the importance of administrative leadership in effecting changes in instructional procedures. Without active leadership from the principal and support from the central administration, there is little likelihood that a new program can be introduced. Decisions involving schoolwide policies related to curriculum and instruction, and decisions involving the acquisition of new materials must be made if a nongraded program is to be established. In the typical school, teachers are not allowed to make these decisions by themselves. The administrative staff and school board make most of the decisions. Given this situation, we should not expect teachers to be the moving force behind the introduction of a nongraded program. Teachers are in the position of having to wait until persons in official leadership capacity are ready to take action.

Too often we hear that the teachers are to blame for the continuance of out-dated instructional practices. However, it would seem that much of the blame rests with the administrative leaders for being willing to accept out-dated practices for so long, and for not exercising sufficient leadership to see that new practices are considered, tried, and supported, not only by verbal encouragement but also financially. In most of the schools with which the author is acquainted where improved educational procedures are being introduced, the moving force can be traced back to strong administrative leadership.

Summary

In this chapter the basic features of nongrading have been explained. The theory of this plan for organizing instruction is the direct opposite of the theory for organizing instruction in a graded program. If the graded plan was fully implemented, all children in a given grade would be expected to do the same work in a year's time, no more and no less. If a nongraded program was fully implemented, each child in a given classroom would be helped to engage in learning activities for which he was ready. Since the children would differ in what they were ready to do, they would not all be expected to accomplish the same work in a year's time.

In actual practice, there are few if any schools where graded or nongraded programs are fully implemented. Usually we find a combination of the two approaches with a greater emphasis toward one or the other.

It was pointed out that educators differ somewhat in the meaning they attach to the term *nongraded.* Some of these differences were discussed in this chapter.

The three principal ways by which a nongraded program can be implemented were also discussed. They were: (1) by providing multi-level instruction in self-contained, heterogeneous classes; (2) by assigning children to self-contained classes according to performance levels and then providing instruction from one class to the next on different levels of difficulty; and (3) by regrouping a large aggregation of children from time to time during the day or week to form clusters or classes that work on different levels under the direction of different teachers. Plan 3 could be either a departmentalized program or one involving team teaching.

It was suggested that administrative leadership is essential if the nongraded approach is to be introduced in a school. A change from a graded to a nongraded program would require that additional instructional materials be purchased and that changes be made in various school-wide policies. In the typical school, it is not possible for teachers themselves to take action in these areas. The teachers must wait for decisions made by the administrative personnel. Thus, if changes are to be implemented, the administrative staff will have to take the initiative.

2

The Nongraded Movement in Perspective

Introduction

Although the term *nongraded school* has only recently come into common usage, most of the practices which have been suggested as ways to implement this plan are not new. Some of them have been advocated for more than one hundred years. In this chapter, the more important of these practices are described and an attempt is made to relate them to the nongraded approach.

Breaking the Lockstep of the Graded School

For the past one hundred years the graded school has been the dominant pattern of elementary school organization in America. Weaknesses in this plan for curriculum and instruction have been the principal reason for interest in the nongraded approach. The graded elementary school came into popular use in America during the middle of the 1800's. It represented a new way to organize the educational program. Prior to that time, the predominant plan was the one-room school in which instruction was nongraded.[1]

[1]Edwin Grant Dexter, *A History of Education in the United States* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1919), Chap. xi. See also Walter H. Small, *Early New England Schools* (Boston: Ginn and Company, Publishers, 1914), Chaps. iii and ix.

In this early type of school, there were children of various ages in the one classroom, and achievement levels varied a great deal. Instruction was differentiated, that is, the teacher gave different assignments to different children. While one child or several pupils did certain work in a subject, others who were ready for more advanced study were assigned such work by the teacher. Thus a number of different levels were being studied simultaneously by pupils in the same classroom. Classes were often smaller than the typical class of thirty today.

During the first half of the 1800's, certain persons in the growing urban centers of the East felt that the one-room school was inadequate to meet the rising tide of enrollments. Building many one-room schools, similar to those already in existence, would be expensive. It was necessary to find a way to educate large numbers of children at less cost. In some cities, a plan was tried whereby a hundred or more children were placed in one large classroom, and older pupils were used as teacher assistants to help with instruction. With so many children in one large classroom, a natural outcome was the separation of the pupils into older and younger groups. Thus, the practice of age-level groupings began to occur.[2] Although this was a new practice in America, it had been tried for some time in certain European schools.

The next logical step was to build two separate rooms — one for the older children and one for the younger ones. This is exactly what was done in some of the city schools. At first, just two age divisions were tried; then three, four, and more were introduced. The Quincy Grammar School, built in Boston in 1848, is said to be the first that was designed from the start to provide separate classrooms for children at each age level. There was a separate teacher for each age group. Since it was felt that all of the pupils in a given room could be taught the same thing, class size in many of the graded schools was allowed to become large. This meant that the per-pupil-cost of education could be kept very low. It was necessary to keep it low because it was difficult to secure money for public schools. Another factor which contributed to the development of the graded school in the United States was the publication, during the first half of the nineteenth century, of the first graded textbook series.

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[2]Dexter, *A History of Education in the United States, Chap. xi.* Also see Ellwood P. Cubberly, *Public Education in the United States* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1947), Chap. v.

Ever since the graded program became firmly established, an ever-increasing number of educators have pointed out its weaknesses and suggested plans to overcome them.[3] The chief weakness in the theory of the graded school is its disregard for children's individual differences. Just because children are the same chronological age and thus assigned to the same grade, does not mean that they are all capable or ready to do the same work during the year. Yet this is exactly what is expected in the graded plan. The critics claim that this program perpetuates an injustice on the above average students, for they are held back, while below average students are faced with work that is too hard and they experience failure. The slower pupils are then submitted to further discouragement by being retained and forced to repeat the work of the grade. The critics have dubbed the graded program the *lockstep plan* — the whole class moves ahead together, with everyone expected to do the same thing in the same period of time.

Many plans have been suggested to break the lockstep pattern of the graded school and to provide more adequately for individual differences. Certain elements of nongrading have been embodied in most of these. As early as the 1860's, William T. Harris, Superintendent of Schools in St. Louis and later Commissioner of Education for the United States, introduced a plan of more frequent promotions and retentions as a way to provide more adequately for children of different ability.[4] The decision to promote or retain children was made several times a year, instead of just once each year. Students of exceptional ability did not have to wait so long to be double-promoted, and when they were, they skipped only part of a year's work instead of a full year. Pupils who were progressing very slowly did not have to struggle through an entire year of failure before being retained and placed with children who were working at more nearly their level. The plan resulted in certain aspects of the lockstep being broken, but the nongraded idea was only partially involved because the children in a given class or section were usually held together for all of their work.

Multi-track programs of one kind or another have been devised as another way to break the lockstep pattern of school organization. One example was the Cambridge Plan of the early 1900's in which the majority of children pursued the elementary program in a

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[3]William S. Gray, "The Evolution of Patterns of Instructional Organization," in *Reading Instruction in Various Patterns of Grouping*, ed. Helen M. Robinson (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1959), pp. 14-19.

[4]William W. Holmes, *School Organization and the Individual Child* (Worcester, Massachusetts: The Davis Press, 1912), Chap. iii.

standard number of years while the more able students constituted a separate group which was helped to progress through the program in less than the standard length of time.[5] An important feature of this organizational scheme was that it provided for the different rates at which children could learn. Another variation was the Santa Barbara Plan of about the same time in history.[6] Here, the pupils were divided into three tracks, but all of the boys and girls remained in the elementary program for the same number of years. Children in the three tracks studied the same basic topics at the same time, but the pupils in the second and third tracks studied the topics in greater depth. An important feature of this organizational scheme was that it provided for variations in the content which children of different ability were expected to learn. The well-known Detroit XYZ Plan of the 1920's contained this feature, and in addition, the more able pupils were helped to progress through the topics at a faster rate than the slower children.[7]

Each of these multi-track programs was an attempt to break the lockstep, but the nongraded approach was only partially implemented because sufficient attention was not given to helping individual children in a given track progress at their own rates. All of the pupils in a given track were expected to do the same thing in the same length of time. And there was usually no provision for the child who performed at one level in reading and a different level in arithmetic. A child in a given track was expected to do all of his work in the different subjects on the same level of difficulty.

Today, variations of these plans are employed in many schools.[8] Sometimes instead of referring to them as multi-track programs, the terms *inter-classroom achievement grouping* or *ability grouping* are used.

In the 1880's Preston Search devised a program of individual progress as a way to break the lockstep. He introduced his plan in the schools of Pueblo, Colorado.[9] An attempt was made to help individual children in a class do the work for which they were

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[5]Ibid.

[6]Ibid.

[7]Stuart A. Courtis, "Ability Grouping in Detroit Schools," in *Adapting the Schools to Individual Differences*, Twenty-fourth Yearbook of the National Society for the Study of Education, Part II (Bloomington, Illinois: Public School Publishing Company, 1925), pp. 44-47.

[8]For one example see Carl F. Hansen, *The Amidon Elementary School* (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1962), Chap. i.

[9]Henry J. Otto, "Instructional Organization of Schools," in *Encyclopedia of Educational Research*, ed. Walter S. Monroe (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1941), p. 434.

ready. The plan clearly embodied the essence of the nongraded approach.

Since 1900 an increasing number of educators have attempted to break away from the lockstep program of the graded school. The battle has been an uphill one, however, for the graded plan has persisted and is still firmly entrenched in many places. It also has the advantage of being a very simple plan to administer, and it is by far the easiest type of program for a teacher to conduct. Because of these circumstances, many teachers and administrators cling to the graded plan even though it appears not to be the best type of instructional program for children.

Early in the 1900's Frederic Burk followed Search's lead and developed a program of individual progress at the San Francisco Normal School.[10] This was a major effort by Burk and his staff to break the lockstep. The children studied individualized, self-instructional materials prepared by the staff. Later, Carleton Washburne, one of Burk's associates, transplanted the idea to the Winnetka Public Schools. There, beginning in 1919, Washburne led the staff in the development of one of the most thoroughly nongraded programs that has yet to be devised.[11] The nongraded approach, which consisted of helping each child progress at the level where he was, permeated the entire school program. Not only was it practiced in the skill subjects with the now famous Winnetka materials for self-instruction,[12] but in the group and creative activities as well, which included social studies, science, art, shop, music, and physical education. It was also evident in various all-school enterprises conducted by the boys and girls, and especially in the extensive guidance and mental health program that was developed.

The Winnetka materials for self-instruction were akin to what we now refer to as *programed instruction*. The topics to be learned were arranged sequentially in small steps or lessons. Simple directions for each step were written especially for children. Each new

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[10]Mary A. Ward, *et al.*, "Individual System As Developed in the San Francisco State Teachers College," in *Adapting the Schools to Individual Differences*, Twenty-fourth Yearbook of the National Society for the Study of Education, Part II (Bloomington, Illinois: Public School Publishing Company, 1925), pp. 60-77.

[11]John L. Tewksbury, "An Historical Study of the Winnetka Public Schools from 1919 to 1946" (unpublished Doctoral dissertation, Northwestern University, 1962).

[12]Gertrude Hildreth, "Individual Differences," in *Encyclopedia of Educational Research*, ed. Walter S. Monroe (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1941), p. 599.

process was carefully explained in simple language. Practice exercises were provided, and the child was expected to check his work himself.

The contributions of Washburne, Burk, and Search are often not given an adequate place in the history of nongrading because these men, in their speaking and writing, made little use of the term *nongraded*. They referred instead to the lockstep pattern of the graded school and to their particular plans for individualizing instruction as a means to break this pattern. But a study of these plans reveals clearly that they were attempts to develop programs that were thoroughly nongraded.

In recent years, an increasing number of self-instructional materials have become available commercially. Not only do they involve auto-instruction but also self-checking. The term *programed instruction* is often used to refer to them. They are sold in such forms as workbooks, teaching machines, and large multi-level pamphlet sets. In each case, the child studies at his own rate. Such materials are useful, and in fact necessary, in a nongraded program where children work at different levels on a given subject. The teacher cannot himself provide all of the instruction on these different levels — he must supplement his own efforts with materials that are self-directive and that the pupils can study and check on their own. The fact that more of these teaching materials are now becoming available commercially contributes to interest in nongrading, because they are of great help to a teacher in conducting this type of program.

It was not until the 1940's that the term *nongraded*, or *ungraded*, came into usage in connection with certain programs designed to break the lockstep of the graded school.[13] One of the first places where the term was used was in the schools of Milwaukee. The program there was inaugurated in the early 1940's and continues in existence today.[14] In the intervening years it has received considerable publicity. The public school system of Park Forest, Illinois, is another of those frequently credited with being one of the early systems to develop a plan of curriculum and instruction specifically identified as *nongraded*.[15] This occurred in the late 1940's. Since then, many educators have expressed interest in the program.

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[13]John I. Goodlad and Robert H. Anderson, *The Nongraded Elementary School*, rev. ed. (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World Inc., 1963), p. 53.

[14]Florence C. Kelly, "The Primary School in Milwaukee," *Childhood Education*, XXIV (January, 1948), 236-38.

[15]Kent C. Austin, "The Ungraded Primary School," *Childhood Education*, XXXIII (February, 1957), 260-63.

Commencing in the late 1940's, an attempt has been made in an increasing number of schools to modify instructional programs so as to embrace more of the nongraded approach, and the term *nongraded* has been used to describe these programs. As this has occurred, a snowball effect has been created, for as certain aspects of nongrading are introduced in one school, the staffs in neighboring schools hear of the innovation and become curious. Thus, interest spreads from one school to another. A recent example of this is the Detroit Public Schools, where nongraded primary units had been developed in several of the elementary buildings. Then in 1964 a decision was made to expand the program to all of the city's elementary schools.

Weaknesses of the Graded School

The weaknesses of the graded plan have become more and more obvious with the passing of the years. Today there is considerable evidence which attests to these weaknesses. One of the most important kinds of evidence are the results of standardized tests which clearly show the wide range of pupil performance among the children of a given age in one grade. In one typical first grade, for instance, general reading performance varied in the spring from 1.0 to 2.4. In a fourth grade, the range extended from 2.0 to 6.2. The range in other subjects was almost as great. Variations in intelligence quotients typically range as much as forty to fifty points. For example, I.Q. scores frequently vary from a low of 80 to a high of 120 or 130. Other measures, including those of motor ability and creativity, reveal similar wide ranges in performance levels among children who are the same chronological age and in the same grade. Not only do these differences exist between children, but in the case of a single child the level of his performance in one area may vary considerably from that in a different area.

Educational psychologists, specialists in child development, and certain teachers and administrators have accumulated a mass of evidence which indicates clearly that each child is different.[16]

[16]Gertrude Hildreth, "Individual Differences," in *Encyclopedia of Educational Research*, ed. Walter S. Monroe (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1941), pp. 596-602. Although this is an older edition of the *Encyclopedia*, Hildreth's article remains an informative one. See also Albert J. Harris, "Influences of Individual Differences on the Reading Program," in *Meeting Individual Differences in Reading*, ed. H. Alan Robinson (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1964), pp. 17-24.

Given this fact, it is absurd to expect all children in a given grade to do the same work and to complete it during the year they spend in the grade. Yet this is exactly what is suggested by the theory of the graded school.

Teachers and administrators who are not convinced of the extent of variation in the performance levels of children in a given grade, are urged to begin their consideration of nongrading by conducting a study in their own school of children's performance levels. The results of standardized tests can easily be used as the source of the necessary information. In any typical school, the picture that is revealed will be unmistakably clear.

It has always been apparent, of course, to teachers and parents that there is some variation in the way children in a graded classroom perform; but it has been a common belief that these differences in performance could be overcome if the slower pupils would just work harder and if the instruction was better. This line of reasoning is often heard when advocates of the graded school discuss ways to deal with children's individual differences. Research studies, however, do not support this way of thinking. The studies show that when a large group of children of mixed performance levels study harder and have better instruction, the range of differences increases rather than decreases.

In a graded program the children who fail in their effort to do the work of a grade are expected to repeat the work the following year. In the theory of the graded plan this is supposed to be an adequate way to take care of these children. There is now considerable evidence which suggests that this procedure is not particularly effective. In numerous studies of retained children, the large majority of the pupils experienced less growth in subject-matter achievement than comparable students who were promoted.[17] In these studies a number of the retained children actually scored lower on the tests at the end of their repeat year than they had the previous year, whereas this occurred less often with comparable pupils who had been promoted. A small minority of the retained children did do somewhat better than their counterparts who were promoted.

One study suggests that children who are retained make poorer social adjustments and develop poorer self-concepts than children

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[17]For a brief summary of these studies, including extensive bibliographic references, see Goodlad and Anderson, *The Nongraded Elementary School*, 1963, pp. 34-35, 231-34. Also see Virgil E. Herrick, "Promoting and Reporting Practices," in *Encyclopedia of Educational Research*, ed. Chester W. Harris (The Macmillan Company, 1960), pp. 438-39.

of similar background and ability who are promoted.[18] This study was concerned with the changes that occurred during only one year. Had it continued over a longer period, the results might be even more disturbing. There is reason to believe that failure to do grade-level work, and subsequent nonpromotion, are factors which may contribute to children's desire to want to leave school when they are older and to be "drop outs."

Few persons, adult or child, want to continue doing that at which they are not able to achieve reasonable success. The natural impulse is to want to get out from under this degrading experience, to leave it and find something else at which they can be more successful. Adults usually have the freedom to change from one type of work to another until they find something more in line with their level of readiness and ability. Children in a graded school, however, are not so fortunate. There is only one path that is open, and they are required to follow it. They must continue to work on material which is too hard, to fail, and be nonpromoted. No other alternative exists in the theory of the graded elementary school; a child cannot even quit, for he must be older before he is given this choice. The program seems to be most unreasonable and to discount completely the fact that children differ in many ways in their performance. There appears, then, to be considerable reason to view as one of the weaknesses of the graded school the method that is used to deal with children who progress more slowly than the average.

In the case of especially bright children in a graded program, they can be double-promoted. When this occurs they skip the work of the next higher grade. Having a child skip over the work of an entire year has always been a problem in graded schools, because there is no specific provision for him to receive instruction in the material which he skipped. How much more logical it would be if an especially bright child could work ahead, step by step, into more challenging material without having to skip any of the important steps. But since this approach is not part of the theory of the graded program, we have another weakness in the plan.

The inability of the graded school to provide adequately for individual differences in performance has caused an increasing number of educators to consider modifications in the plan. Some

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[18]John I. Goodlad, "Some Effects of Promotion and Nonpromotion upon the Social and Personal Adjustment of Children," *Journal of Experimental Education*, XXII (June, 1954), pp. 301-28. Also see pages 37-39 of Goodlad and Anderson's *The Nongraded Elementary School*, 1963.

of the more significant of these were mentioned earlier in the chapter. Included were individualized instruction, schemes to group children according to performance levels, and nongrading. Advocates of nongrading believe that it holds more promise than graded programs for creating an atmosphere in which children may develop more positive attitudes toward themselves, toward learning, toward teachers and other authority figures, and toward the school and other institutions for learning. It would seem as though a child would have a more favorable attitude in these areas if he has reasonable success with his daily work than if he encounters repeated failure with it. In the case of able children in a nongraded program, they may be stimulated by the more challenging work that is presented to them. In a graded school, such pupils may become less interested in their work because it moves so slowly and does not deal with topics in sufficient depth.

Progressive Education

Two movements in recent years have helped to create a climate of thought which is favorable to the nongraded approach. They are Progressive Education[19] and the mental health movement in education.[20] Both movements represented efforts to overcome weaknesses in traditional school practice; because of this, some of the beliefs that were propounded were similar to those already described in the previous sections of this chapter dealing with the weaknesses of graded schools.

Progressive Education was not a single, clearly defined plan, but instead a collection of many ideas. One of these was the concern that schools provide more adequately for children's individual differences. Another, and certainly one of the most important, was the belief that there should be a freer school environment, one which would be more conducive to nurturing children's creativeness and self-reliance. The Progressives reacted against the program of the traditional elementary school of the early 1900's which was very rigid and entirely pre-planned around adult ideas. They also felt that in the traditional school the child was viewed merely as a depository for skills and information. In contrast to this view,

[19]Carleton Washburne, *What Is Progressive Education* (New York: The John Day Company, 1952).

[20]Carleton Washburne, *A Living Philosophy of Education* (New York: The John Day Company, 1940), Chap. iii.

the Progressives believed that boys and girls were dynamic beings who should be helped to use skills and information in ways that were meaningful to them, and helped to develop and use their own imaginative powers to deal with various situations. The Progressives believed that if the program was more flexible it would provide a better learning environment. This desire for greater flexibility is akin to the interest which many educators of today have for nongrading.

The Mental Health Movement in Education

Another factor to consider in appraising circumstances which have contributed to the current interest in nongrading is the mental health movement in education. This movement began in the second and third decades of the 1900's, and since then has gained increasing recognition, although even today it is an area with which many teachers and administrators are only vaguely familiar. One of the important concerns in this movement is that each child be helped to develop a positive self-image. Mental health workers, psychologists, pediatricians, social workers, and educators believe that many factors influence a child's self-concept. Most important are the attitudes of parents, peers, and school personnel. Children who are subjected to repeated failure experiences in any one of these areas might be expected to have difficulty forming a positive self-image. Mental health workers believe that the practice of criticizing a child who does not do the work of his grade in school, even though he has put forth effort and made progress at his own level, is damaging to the child's feelings about his own worth. This problem is intensified when a child experiences failure for several years in a row and in more than one subject.

Persons interested in the mental health movement believe that one important factor in helping a child develop positive mental health is to make it possible for him to have a reasonable number of success experiences — certainly more successes than failures. Today, an increasing number of persons have an awareness of factors related to mental health. This awareness provides a background which is favorable to the nongraded approach, because the latter offers a way to help more children have success experiences in school. As more teachers and administrators receive

direct training in the mental health approach to education, and as they are influenced by the mental health specialists who work in the schools, more school staff members will have a background which will cause them to be favorably disposed toward nongrading.

Contributions of Goodlad and Anderson

Any discussion of factors contributing to the growth of interest in nongrading would be incomplete without reference to the work of John I. Goodlad and Robert H. Anderson. Both men have conducted studies regarding various aspects of nongrading and have contributed many publications explaining and advocating this approach to curriculum and instruction. Their scholarly book, *The Nongraded Elementary School*,[21] has enjoyed a wide readership. It presents a convincing rationale for this type of program, and it contains a comprehensive bibliography which is valuable to persons who desire to study this topic in depth. Their book differs from this one in that this author has focused on specific operational procedures in nongraded programs and furnished examples that are in addition to those available elsewhere.

Possible Advantages of a Nongraded Program

Advocates of nongrading believe that there are a number of advantages to this type of program. Some of those most often cited are:

• Each child is helped to work at his own level of readiness. Therefore he is more likely to have success experiences with his work. In a graded classroom students of lower achievement are often forced to advance to new work with the rest of the class even though they have only a vague understanding of the previous skills. After an extended exposure to this practice, many become discouraged and confused. In a nongraded program, a child does not move on to more difficult topics until he has had reasonable success with the preliminary work. Thus there are fewer gaps in his learning and less reason to become confused.

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[21] John I. Goodlad and Robert H. Anderson, *The Nongraded Elementary School*, rev. ed. (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, Inc.), 1963.

- Children are not designated as failures simply because they cannot do work at a certain level. They are not expected to perform tasks for which they are not ready.
- Because of the greater opportunity for children to have success experiences with their work, the pupils may develop a more favorable attitude towards learning, and toward educational institutions and teachers.
- Children who are slow starters in first grade but who later make faster progress, are not penalized for their earlier retardation by being made to repeat first grade.
- When a child has an extended absence, he would not have to miss important work in the skill subjects. He could pick up his studies at the point where he left off before his absence.
- There are fewer gaps in instruction for especially bright children; even though they progress more rapidly they do not skip the work of a given grade. Because these children are helped to progress to work commensurate with their ability, they may find school a challenging experience.
- Children who progress slowly are not failed and then forced to repeat a year's work in the basic skills. Failure and repetition experiences of this type are considered detrimental to the development of constructive attitudes in children.
- The program provides for the wide range of differences which exist between children, and also for differences in an individual child's performance from one subject to the next. In addition it provides for the fact that a child's rate of learning varies from one period to the next as he is growing older. At some times he may make rapid progress whereas at other times he may progress more slowly or remain temporarily on a plateau.
- Children may develop more self-reliance. Since instruction is conducted at different levels for different children in the same classroom, the teacher will be unable to work directly with all of the children all of the time. While he works with a few, the rest must proceed on their own with various activities. More responsibility is placed on the learner, and there is reason to believe that this may foster the development of self-reliance.
- Since the children are not all competing against a uniform standard (grade-level expectancies), it is possible that less emphasis will be placed on comparing how well children measure up to such a standard. Instead, more emphasis can be placed on the progress and effort which an individual child shows regardless of his level.

- Since none of the work in the skill subjects is reserved for a particular year or time, teachers should feel less compelled to push slower children through grade-level work regardless of their lack of readiness. For the same reason, teachers would have no reason to fear that the most capable students, by doing advanced work, would encroach on material reserved for the next teacher.
- Any serious attempt at nongrading will necessitate a reappraisal of what should be taught and what methods of instruction should be employed. Hopefully, such a reappraisal would result in an improved educational program.

Research Efforts

Many teachers and administrators want to know if there is research evidence which indicates the relative merits of nongrading. A number of studies have been conducted, but in the judgment of this author the results are inconclusive. The principal focus of these studies has been to determine whether children learn more in a nongraded program than they do in a graded one. A close examination of this research reveals that the investigators have had considerable difficulty designing studies that would yield meaningful results.[22] The reason for this is that nongrading involves an approach to education which to be thoroughly implemented involves many different aspects of school practice. Because of its pervasiveness, a great many variables are operative, and it has proved difficult to control all of these in the research efforts.

An important variable that has not been adequately controlled in comparisons of graded and nongraded plans is the type of teaching employed in the two plans. In some of the studies, the word of a school official has been accepted as sufficient to classify a school program as graded or nongraded. No attempt was made by the researcher to specify the instructional practices that were necessary for a program to qualify as one type or the other, nor was anything done to determine whether certain instructional practices were actually employed in the many classes participating in a given study.

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[22]For a further discussion of some of the problems involved in the design of meaningful research, and for bibliographic references to important studies that have been conducted, see Goodlad and Anderson *The Nongraded Elementary School*, 1963, pp. 214-18, and John I. Goodlad, "Toward Improved School Organization," *The National Elementary Principal*, XLI (December, 1961), 1961 Yearbook, p. 86.

Another variable that has not been adequately controlled in comparing the two approaches is the method of assigning children to classes. The graded and nongraded schools in a particular study should all employ the same method of assigning pupils to teachers. If this is not done, it would be difficult to tell whether the results that were obtained were due to differences between the graded and nongraded approach, or to differences in the way children were assigned to teachers. For instance, if heterogeneous grouping is practiced in some of the schools and inter-classroom achievement grouping is practiced in others, the results may be due more to the differences in grouping than to the differences between the graded and nongraded aspects of the program.

If the variables mentioned above are not carefully controlled, the results of the research will be meaningless. In most of the studies conducted to date, these variables were not adequately handled. Therefore, this author does not believe that it is possible at this time to judge the value of nongrading on the basis of research evidence. We will have to wait for further studies which may be conducted in such a way that the results will be more meaningful. Although we will have to be content with this state of indefiniteness for awhile, we should not forget that there *is* rather definite evidence that a graded program is not a satisfactory way to work with children. This evidence was presented earlier in this chapter. Something else must surely be better, and nongrading may possibly be part of that "something."

One study by Hillson and his associates bears mentioning because it represents an effort at more careful control of some of the variables. In this project, the reading performance of children in graded and nongraded programs was compared.[23] An important feature of this study is that specific attention was given to defining criteria of gradedness and nongradedness, and then selecting classes which met these standards. Preliminary results indicate that children in the nongraded program performed somewhat better.

Most of the studies to date have attempted to evaluate children's performance in the skill subjects, especially reading. There have been few attempts to investigate such important factors as chil-

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[23]Maurie Hillson and others, "A Controlled Experiment Evaluating the Effects of a Nongraded Organization on Pupil Achievement," in *Change and Innovation in Elementary School Organization: Selected Readings*, ed., Maurie Hillson (New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, 1965), pp. 365-72. This book also contains a collection of several other articles which describe research studies of nongraded programs.

dren's self-concepts, attitudes toward learning, and level of self-reliance. These are important to consider in comparing graded and nongraded programs, and perhaps even more important than reading or arithmetic performance. The fact that changes in these other areas occur slowly, over a period of years rather than months, increases considerably the difficulty of obtaining objective evidence. It is difficult enough to create matched teaching situations for a few months, but when this is attempted for three to six years, the difficulties become enormous. The lack of research to evaluate these various non-academic factors is another reason why it is premature to judge the value of nongrading on the basis of existing studies.

Summary

In this chapter, an attempt has been made to provide sufficient background information on nongrading to help the reader gain a perspective on the movement. Essentially, nongrading is a reaction to weaknesses in the graded school — a reaction that has been gathering momentum for one hundred years. Although the term *nongraded* is new, many of the ideas embodied in this approach are not new at all — they have been suggested individually for many years. One of the principal weaknesses of the graded plan is that it does not provide sufficiently for children's individual differences in growth rates and learning capacities. Today more than ever before, extensive evidence is available to verify that such differences exist and are in fact very great. A nongraded program is one in which an attempt is made to work with children at their own levels. It appears that such a program fits very well with the way children really are.

Several other factors were cited as contributing to the present interest in nongrading. These were the influence of Progressive Education, the mental health movement in education, and the published materials of Professors John I. Goodlad and Robert H. Anderson.

To date, research efforts to determine the relative effectiveness of graded and nongraded programs have not yielded results which are particularly meaningful. We are still at the level of having to consider nongrading in the light of claims and theories which seem plausible rather than as a practice clearly supported by the weight of research evidence.

Advocates of nongrading believe that this approach to curriculum organization and instruction holds more promise than does a graded program for creating an atmosphere in which boys and girls may develop more positive attitudes toward themselves, as well as toward teachers, educational institutions, and learning. Positive attitudes in these areas are essential if a growing child is to be able to live successfully in our modern society where continued learning and continued attendance in educational institutions is so essential.

Looking toward the future it seems probable that we will see a continued movement in schools away from the theory of graded programming toward a more nongraded approach. A graded program is just not in harmony with what we know about children, whereas nongrading seems to fit so well with the way children really are. As teachers and administrators introduce instructional and grouping procedures to provide for the wide range of children's individual differences (which is clearly happening on an ever-increasing scale), this very process will represent a move toward nongrading, whether or not one chooses to use this term.

In an earlier chapter, an explanation of the meaning of nongrading was presented. In the chapters which follow the present one, specific procedures in the operation of nongraded programs are discussed. An attempt is made to deal with factors that teachers and administrators would want to think about as they consider whether or not to incorporate more of the nongraded approach in their educational program.